

James Cartlidge

**Anxiety and Boredom  
in the Covid-19 Crisis:  
A Heideggerian Analysis**

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the biggest global challenges the human race has faced since World War II. It has brought global panic, social and economic disruption unprecedented for our time and has resulted in over half a million deaths. Faced with the spread of a deadly virus, restricted freedom under lockdown, being furloughed or fired from work, and the numerous other difficulties presented by the crisis, people worldwide have no doubt experienced a plethora of emotional responses and perhaps encountered new existential experiences. Two of the most salient, I would suggest, have been profound experiences of anxiety and boredom – anxiety about the virus, the changes the pandemic may bring to the world, the socio-economic precarity it has occasioned for many, but also boredom in the face of the lockdown and the lack of a normal social or working life. Here, I will engage Martin Heidegger's penetrating philosophical account of the different varieties of anxiety and boredom, showing its potential as an interesting conceptual toolkit for analysing certain phenomena in the human experience of the Covid-19 crisis, and for developing an account of their meaning and emancipatory potential.

Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and boredom as what I call 'revelatory moods' hinges on an unsettling phenomenon that characterizes them: *an inability to make sense of the world* – something we have no doubt all been familiar with to some degree lately. In Heideggerian anxiety and boredom, we become so paralysed by anxiety or so profoundly bored that the structure of our world changes, the space of significance we usually inhabit drains away and we are temporarily, radically unable to make sense of anything. Perhaps such

anxious and boring encounters with the changing nature of our world have been occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic. But it is not all doom and gloom: Heidegger argues that these intense existential experiences carry revelatory and emancipatory potential that should be celebrated and harnessed. Undergoing the unsettling experiences of anxiety and boredom allows for vital existential insights to be conveyed upon us about our predicament as human beings. They forcefully confront us with our freedom and bring us before our role as the creators and maintainers of the significance of the world as such.

For Heidegger, anxiety and boredom function as catalysts for our being able to authentically seize hold of our lives and own our freedom, responsibilities and sense-making role in a way that we would not be able to without these kind of experiences. Revelatory anxiety and boredom play an enabling role in this respect, providing us the necessary insight and experience for unlocking our existential potential. This is because revelatory moods involve an encounter with the structure of the world as such, in the moment of its breaking-down. Heidegger theorizes the world, individual and collective, as structured in terms of significance and meaning – everything in our worlds is encountered and understood in terms of what it means, its significance to us and our projects. This structure of significance is what constitutes the context in which we live, and it is only within this significance-structure that we are able to make sense of things at all. The analysis of world as significance-structure gives us a framework for pinpointing, in a literal sense, how the world has changed as a result of Covid-19 – what has become significant, more or less significant, what has arisen as meaningful, disappeared as insignificant, and how the world is arranged. Revelatory moods convey the structure of the world to us when this structure temporarily breaks down, which also confers various other implications on us concerning our freedom, responsibilities and role within our world.

In what follows, I will take Heidegger's analyses of anxiety and boredom and apply them to the versions of these phenomena that have arisen in the pandemic. I hope to show that his work affords us a way of making sense of the way that the pandemic has challengingly confronted us not with the overwhelming potential of our freedom, *but with its limits, and the changing nature of the social world*. It is through the intense affective experiences of the current crisis that a more forceful kind of solidarity can potentially be forged, and new modes of enacting this solidarity can be engendered. Confronting us with the nature of our freedom compels us to engage with its limits and with the freedom of

others. Heidegger's thought, therefore, offers a strong political dimension, despite his repeated insistence that he was doing 'ontology', not politics or ethics.

## MOODS, WORLD AND THE ANALYTIC OF DASEIN

In the late 1920s – especially *Being and Time*, *What is Metaphysics?* and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* – Heidegger engaged deeply with the analysis of moods, often singling out anxiety and boredom as important examples. Before we can get to them, however, I will contextualize them within Heidegger's overall project and his general account of moods, which takes place in what he calls an 'analytic of Dasein'.<sup>1</sup> Dasein is defined by Heidegger as being, among other things, the entity which can raise the question that defined his career above all: the question of the meaning of Being. Dasein can ask 'what does being mean?' because its own being "is an issue for it"<sup>2</sup>, something that concerns it, that it cares about and is disposed some way towards. Human beings are obviously a case of Dasein, but Heidegger avoids this term (and others like 'consciousness', 'person' or 'subject') to free us from any preconceptions of what he is analysing that we might inherit from the historical usage of these terms. The first step to answering the question of Being, according to Heidegger, is to conduct a thorough analysis of the existence of the entity which asks it, so we might know what its asking, understanding or answering the question would consist in. This famously leads Heidegger to distinguish his project as 'fundamental ontology', since it is solely concerned with and motivated by the question of Being. It is not an ethics, or a politics, but a descriptive analysis of the structure of Dasein's existence, to prepare the way for answering the question of Being. Whether or not he was successful in his attempt to lay the groundwork for (or answer) his guiding question is debatable, but it is under the guise of the analytic of Dasein that Heidegger conducted much of his most interesting and influential work.

---

<sup>1</sup> He explicitly attempts this in *Being and Time*, but he continues using 'Dasein', and analysing its being, throughout his career. His work in the late 1920s, that I will focus on here, in many ways seems like a direct continuation and expansion of what he attempts there, especially the analysis of boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* and the development of the account of anxiety in *What is Metaphysics?*.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger 1962, 32.

One of the analytics' key findings is that moods play an important role in structuring Dasein's existence: they are integrally involved in our being and constitute part of the process by which we make sense of our world. When we ordinarily think about moods, we might think about being in a 'good' or 'bad' mood. How I feel about myself, my environment, the people and things I encounter, will depend on what mood I am in. If I am in a good mood, I will be more likely to find the things around me amusing, pleasant or inoffensive, rather than annoying, or tiresome – which I would be more likely to if I was in a bad mood. Moods give us an affective context to exist in at a given moment which alters our experience, and partially determine how we will make sense of our immediate environment. In Heidegger's terminology, a mood is framed as a way of being 'disposed' to one's existence, and the term he uses to bring this out is *Befindlichkeit*, which can be translated as 'disposedness'.<sup>3</sup> Because our being is an issue for us, we are always concerned with it, always disposed to it in some way – 'disposedness' is an ever-present feature of our existence. But although we are always disposed to our existence, we are not always disposed to it in the same way. The different ways that our 'disposedness' can manifest itself are moods: "what we indicate [...] by the term 'disposedness' [...] [is] the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our *Stimmung* [mood], our being-attuned" (Heidegger 1962, 172). The German *Stimmung*, as Macquarrie and Robinson point out, is a "usual word for one's mood or humour" (Heidegger 1962, 172, footnote 3). Moods, for Heidegger, are the different ways we can be disposed, or 'attuned' to our existence, as we can tune to different radio stations. Moods provide the affective contexts we exist in from moment to moment, and determine how we encounter and disclose (i.e. make sense of and reveal) everything around us. As Richard Polt writes:

Moods are *disclosive*. They show us things in a more fundamental way than theoretical propositions ever can. For example, fear does not cut us off from things – to the contrary, it *reveals* something as a threat.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Although not without some controversy, since no direct English equivalent is available. However, the notion of being disposed towards one's existence through moods is central to Heidegger's account of them, and 'disposedness' arguably brings this out better than the other possible translations. For a helpful list of alternative translations, see William Blattner's webpage 'Translations of Heidegger's Jargon' (<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/blattnew/heid/Heidegger-jargon.html>).

<sup>4</sup> Polt 1999, 66.

Colloquially, moods are not always spoken of as having an object, or of being disclosive. Bad moods, especially, are often thought of as distorting, or as cutting us off from a more rational way of understanding our world, and sometimes the causes of our moods are not precisely known to us. Heidegger seems to agree that the cause of our moods is not always clear, speaking of them as things which “assail” us (Heidegger 1962, 176) without warning or consent. But far from cutting us off from the world, or having no object, moods are part of the way we make contact with the world and disclose the things in it as meaningful. A mood reveals our world and the things in it in a particular way, giving us different ways of apprehending them, which are not always positive. But just because a mood is negative or painful does not mean that it removes us from the world, or that it has no disclosive power – it is one of the many ways we are brought into contact with our world, a way we can be disposed to it, a way it can be encountered. In giving us a way to be disposed to our existence, moods give us a way of disclosing (revealing, encountering) the things around us, and ‘tuning in’ to our environment. Fear discloses the approaching gunman as threatening, or a situation as scary. The disclosive level moods work on, importantly, is more fundamental than that of rational processes such as knowing, reasoning, or thinking. Moods form part of a more primal way we have of making sense of the world. The way we *feel* about things partially determines how we will make sense of them before we rationalize about them. Before we can talk, or think philosophically, reason (etc.), we have moods, and we still make some kind of pre-linguistic, pre-rational sense of the things around us, even if we do not have the ability to linguistically express it. The sense we make of things is informed and affected by our mood - how we feel about things will determine (to some degree) how we engage with them and what level of significance we attribute to them.

One of the driving insights of *Being and Time* is that *rationality, knowing, and reasoning are only possible on the basis of this more primal way we have of making sense of things*, which operates on a different level than and in a different way to higher-order rationality. Moods are an integral part of this primal sense-making process. This is why Heidegger wrote that “to significations, words accrue” (Heidegger 1962, 204). Before we can talk about things, we must already have a grasp of them as being somehow significant, we must already be able to disclose them as being meaningful, such that we can identify and talk about them – they must, in some way, already ‘signify’ something.

As Robert Scharff writes:

“historical-human life [...] belongs to us and is possessed by us as an endlessly rich, diverse and multiply interested environmental experience that is *an already meaningful process before it gets theoretically sliced up and conceptualized*.”<sup>5</sup>

Prior to reasoning and knowing, we have a pre-reflective familiarity with the things around us, with moods partially constituting the process by which this familiarity comes about<sup>6</sup> – a process that makes higher-order rationality possible. Even before we think, know about things – “they are *meaningfully present* to us”<sup>7</sup> – and it is the pre-rational (but still meaningful) presence of things to us that interests Heidegger in his analysis of Dasein. Moods play a role in this basic sense-making process and partially account for how we disclose objects as meaningful on a pre-reflective level. It is always in terms of significance, usefulness, and meaning that things are ordinarily encountered in our experience – which is not to say that everything you encounter is significant to you, or very significant. Some things will be insignificant, or minimally significant – but everything is seen in the light of significance, understood in terms of it, and arranged in your world accordingly.

This process does not happen in isolation, from object to object – every object that we encounter, everything we disclose as significant to some degree, is fitted into the wider context of meaning we operate in. This context is comprised of an immeasurably complicated network of significant things and their relations, the totality of what you encounter in the course of your existence. This network, with the things in it arranged in relation to one another in terms of their significance and usefulness, is what Heidegger calls the ‘world’. Your world is a structure of significance, a “totality of involvements” (Heidegger 1962, 116) comprised of everything you encounter and are involved with – which constitutes a context of meaning. The nature of

---

<sup>5</sup> Scharff 2019, xx, emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Partially constituting’ because Heidegger emphasizes how moods go hand in hand with other processes that structure our primal sense-making process, like what he calls ‘understanding’ and ‘interpretation’. But to go into them here would take too much time and is not relevant to our topic.

<sup>7</sup> Sheehan 2015, 111, emphasis added.

this context, or “the worldhood of the world” as Heidegger calls it, is one of “involvement and significance” where everything is understood and related in these terms (Heidegger 1962, 114). My world is everything I am involved with that I apprehend as (to some degree, or negatively) significant. What an object means to you will be determined by its place in the significance-structure of your world, and the place it has there will be determined by what significance it has, how much, and how it relates to other things in the structure. Moods partially constitute our pre-rational sense-making process by which we disclose things and fit them into the context of our world, which is structured in terms of significance and meaning.

#### HEIDEGGER ON ANXIETY AND BOREDOM

Most moods do not stop us from living in our usual world of significance. Even in a bad mood, I can usually go about my business, operate functionally, deal with people, objects, etc. But there is an important variety of mood (that Heidegger identifies a type of anxiety and boredom as examples of) where our everyday experience of the world is temporarily, radically altered. These ‘revelatory moods’ are intense and unsettling, but contain revelatory, emancipatory potential and are, if Heidegger is right, surely a significant formative experience for human beings. It should be noted that, in arguing that moods are integral to disclosing our world and coming to terms with our freedom, Heidegger is not committed to saying that moods always disclose correctly and completely, or that they cannot distort our understanding of things. An angry mood can certainly distort our understanding of something, and certain moods may conceal things, rather than reveal them. People are very capable of self-deception, and our emotional responses to things often play a large role in this. Someone may refuse to believe something and be in denial about it because of the painful emotions they might feel upon realising its truth. But even if a mood is distorting something or disclosing something incorrectly, it is through the operation of the mood that we are able to make any sense (however confused) of the thing at all. Furthermore, Heidegger realises that people do not always pay attention to the lessons their moods teach them, or heed their insights. So while the existential and emancipatory potential of revelatory moods is great, it is important to bear in mind the potential shortcomings moods can have. But our focus here will be on what

it is about our existential predicament that moods (correctly) disclose to us.

Heidegger emphasizes that revelatory anxiety [*Angst*] is “not [...] the quite common anxiousness”, which he (perhaps wrongly) claims is “ultimately reducible to fearfulness”.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not they are reducible, the reason Heidegger links ‘common’ anxiety to fear is because he argues that, like fear, common anxiety is always directed onto and disclosive of determinate things in the world. We get anxious about specific, easily-understandable things<sup>9</sup>: exams, dentists, work. But we also get anxious about less determinate things like the unknown, death, or the possibility of catching a virus. But in all of these cases, our anxiety is directed towards something meaningful, has a place in our world, has significance. Similarly, when Heidegger speaks about revelatory boredom [*Langeweile*], he does not mean the kind of boredom we might normally think of when we hear the word. Heidegger examines three types of boredom: “becoming bored by”, “being bored with”, and “profound boredom”.<sup>10</sup> The first two types, like fear and (common) anxiety, are always directed toward determinate, significant things, the only difference is that in the first case it is a single thing (a book, film, TV show), and in the second, a set of things forming a context (a dinner party, a city, a job). These types of boredom may be interesting for other reasons, but they are not revelatory, according to Heidegger, in the same way ‘profound boredom’ is.

I will first spend a little time explaining what anxiety and boredom have in common before turning to their individual characteristics. Though they each have their own, specific existential insights to convey, they share some in common and involve similar, related experiences. What unites revelatory boredom and anxiety, and distinguishes them from their more common counterparts, is that they both involve profound, total experiences of meaninglessness, where “all things and we ourselves sink into indifference [...] [and] we can get no hold on things”. (Heidegger 1998, 88) Our worlds are usually structured and arranged in terms of significance and meaning, but

---

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger 1998, 88.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Things’ or ‘objects’ used in this sense have a broad meaning, the object of my fear, anxiety or boredom need not be a physical object, or thing. Impending death, for example, could be an object of fear or anxiety, and it would still be a determinate thing in the context of one’s world, which has significance.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger 1995, part I and II.



in revelatory anxiety and boredom, significance recedes from us completely – “things become indifferent *as a whole*” (Heidegger 1995, 138). Because everything becomes insignificant in them, revelatory anxiety and boredom both involve a state where the entire structure of our world as such changes, and we are temporarily but completely removed from our normal way of being. They both involve a state where we become unable to latch onto anything as significant or meaningful – we become unable to make sense of the world. The extent and intensity of this experience of meaninglessness is “overpowering” (Heidegger 1995, 136), and the inability to make sense of things and latch onto them meaningfully extends even to ourselves. We become “an undifferentiated no one [...] name, standing, vocation, role, age and fate [...] disappear” (Heidegger 1995, 135-136). These things disappear when the significance of the world disappears because the significance-structure of the world is what provides us with a context of meaning where things make sense. If the significance of the world recedes from us, everything in our world that contributes to our understanding of ourselves, our identity, our lives, vanishes too. The experience of meaningless present in revelatory anxiety and boredom is also one of a thoroughgoing depersonalization.

But why do anxiety and boredom involve such experiences? Part of the answer can be found in something else they have in common: their object, what they are directed at and disclosive of, *is not a determinate object in the world, but the world*. Remember that the more common types of anxiety and boredom are all directed onto specific, determinate ‘objects’, understood in terms of their significance and placement in our world. In revelatory moods, however, no easy clarity about their object is available:

anxiety does not ‘see’ any definite ‘here’ or ‘yonder’ from which it comes. That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere*. Anxiety ‘does not know’ what that in the face of which it is anxious is (Heidegger 1962, 231).

The reason that the object of anxiety is nowhere and cannot be ‘known’ to it, is because the object of anxiety is not *an object* at all and has no place *in the world* because “*the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety*” (Heidegger 1962, 231). Revelatory anxiety’s disclosive power comes from the fact that it is disclosive of our being-in-the-world, and the structure of our world as such. In anxiety, we are raised up from our usual immersion in a network of significance, removing us from our normal engagement with the world in an encounter with the world itself. In the receding of significance,

we encounter it more forcefully because we now have an outside perspective to compare it to. It is the removal from our ordinary existence in significance that confers on us what this existence is otherwise always like. Similarly, in profound boredom, what we are bored with is not any particular object or objects at all, we are totally and completely bored, “elevated beyond the particular situation” (Heidegger 1995, 137). We become bored not with this, or that, but ‘it’: profound boredom happens “whenever we say, or better, whenever we silently know, that *it is boring for one*” (Heidegger 1995, 134). The ‘it’ is no longer a specific item, set of items, or a worldly context – ‘it’ stands for our world as such, standing before us in cold indifference. This is how we can begin to understand why these moods have revelatory power: they involve a “decoupl[ing] from any relatedness to specific situations”<sup>11</sup> which brings us into a sharp encounter with our world – the structure of significance where our lives take place – and makes us aware of this structure. Revelatory anxiety and boredom involve a “telling refusal” (Heidegger 1995, 137) – we are made aware of, ‘told’ the significance of the world by its temporary refusal, in a kind of ‘you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone’ experience. The absolute receding of the usual structure of the world present in revelatory anxiety and boredom is what allows us to appreciate the significance of the world as what it otherwise always is. Simply put, they allow us to realise the significance of significance.

These are the things that revelatory anxiety and boredom have in common, but what differentiates them? What makes one anxiety and the other boredom? The best way to approach this is by considering how Heidegger characterizes the experience of them as being “related to Dasein’s *innermost freedom*” (Heidegger 1995, 136). Anxiety and boredom are both encounters with and experiences of our freedom – this is the key to their revelatory and emancipatory potential. But although they both bring us before the significance of the world and our freedom, they do so in different ways, involving different affective states and different, unique insights to convey along with their shared revelation of our world and its structure.

Let’s begin with anxiety. In revelatory anxiety, we are not anxious about any determinate thing *in* the world. We become so overcome with anxiety that the significance of things recedes and we are confronted with and paralysed before the world as such. This anxiety is really an anxiety in the face

---

<sup>11</sup> Slaby 2010.

of the nature, scope and burden of our freedom. The confrontation with our world and its structure is also an encounter with our *possibilities* – the things we can potentially do with our lives, the ability and responsibility we have to make choices about our lives and the lives of others.

Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its *Being towards* its ownmost ability-to-be [*Seinkönnen*] – that is, its *Being-free* for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself. Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its *Being free* for the authenticity of its Being, and for this authenticity as a possibility which it always is (Heidegger 1962, 232).

Anxiety makes manifest the weight of our freedom, confronting us with it in a sharp, intense encounter which enables us to take hold of our lives more fully. We are free to make our own choices and live in an authentic manner where we own these choices and responsibilities. We have an overwhelming range of possibilities, things we can achieve for ourselves and for others. Realising all of this is coupled with the realisation of our role as human beings: we are freely responsible for the creation and maintenance of the significance of our world. We make and inhabit significance, and each bear responsibility for the meaning we attribute to things, the proliferation of meaning, the way we inhabit and construct a space of significance, and ultimately how we conduct our lives. We each have the responsibility to make choices for ourselves and others, the responsibility of inhabiting and shaping a world of meaning, and the responsibility to live up to these facts. Revelatory anxiety is anxious because: who *wouldn't* feel anxious upon realising all this for the first time?

Revelatory boredom involves related, but different experiences. All types of boredom, according to Heidegger, are characterised by the fact that in them “time becomes long” (Heidegger 1995, 80), we are ‘held in limbo’ and ‘left empty’ (Heidegger 1995, 87). Boredom involves a feeling of unfulfilled emptiness where we are left hanging, feeling the weight of time as it stretches out, lacking any interesting, meaningful activity. We become welcoming of anything to pass the time and to not be bored anymore. But sometimes boredom can become so overwhelming that it extends to our existence as a whole, we become unable to latch onto anything (even ourselves) as significant, our world becomes indifferent and we are confronted with its structure of significance in a similar fashion to anxiety – we become bored not with this or that thing, but with our being-in-the-world as such. In the refusal of significance, the structure of the world announces itself. The difference is that we encounter our freedom in a different way, it is disclosed to us through a different mood, we get a different perspec-

tive on it. Rather than finding our freedom and possibilities anxiety-inducing, overwhelming and paralysing, we welcome and appreciate them because it is through them that we can alleviate boredom. Boredom also confronts us with significance, but it is a confrontation where we openly welcome it because our role as the keepers of significance is precisely what can stop us from having empty, boring and meaningless lives. Revelatory boredom reveals the possibility we have as human beings of making and deciding the significance of the world for ourselves. It also compels us toward a more authentic way of seizing hold of our existence because if we do, we will not be bored, and our lives will not be lacking in significance. The boring receding of things “point[s] to’ the possibilities that they nevertheless *would* or *could* offer to Dasein” (Slaby 2010, 115), and the fact that, if we choose to, we can make something of these possibilities.

Heidegger theorizes anxiety and boredom as revelatory moods that disclose the nature and scope of our freedom in a confrontation with our world and its being-structured by significance. It is through anxiety and boredom that these things get experientially revealed to us in a non-propositional, non-theoretical manner. Both involve a state where the significance of the world totally recedes and existential insights about our freedom and role are conveyed on us. Anxiety paralyzes us before the stunning weight of our freedom, the responsibility we have over our choices, and the role we have in the creation and maintenance of the significance of the world. Boredom confronts us with the same things, but in a state where we become more authentically welcoming of our freedom and significance-constructing role, eager to grasp the opportunities they present to us with both hands to avoid boring, meaningless lives. Both anxiety and boredom act as catalysts for our being able to experience and realise these types of insight. Without such experiences, we would not be able to seize hold of our existences fully authentically, or realise the full implications of being the kind of being that we are.

Although Heidegger only discusses anxiety and boredom in detail, he also indicates that joy is a revelatory mood, neglecting to explain why (Heidegger 1998, 87). After the 1930s, he never pursues the analysis of revelatory moods with the same rigour again – all of which might lead us to wonder a few things. Why anxiety, boredom and joy? Is it the same revelatory moods for every person? Do they all work in the same way for everyone? Are there more revelatory moods? Heidegger did not say as much as he perhaps should have on these issues, but a passage in *What is Metaphysics?* may be instructive here, where he is explicitly talking about revelatory moods.

Being attuned, in which we 'are' one way or another and which determines us through and through, lets us find ourselves among beings as a whole. Finding ourselves attuned not only unveils beings as a whole *in various ways*, but this unveiling – far from being incidental – is the fundamental occurrence of our Da-Sein (Heidegger 1998, 100, emphasis added).

Here, Heidegger indicates that revelatory moods reveal 'in various ways', and the experience of this multifaceted unveiling of existence is the fundamental occurrence of our lives. I find it plausible, therefore, that there could be other revelatory moods, that they may not all work in the same way from person to person, and that not every person will necessarily experience them all. But it is the ongoing experience of such moods that confer on us the necessary existential insights we need to have authentic, rounded lives.

#### ANXIETY AND BOREDOM IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

With this sketch of Heidegger's analysis of revelatory moods in hand, let us turn to applying it to how the phenomena of anxiety and boredom have arisen in the Covid-19 pandemic, and see if we can use or develop Heidegger's work to gain some insight into these experiences. In Heidegger's framework, the emancipatory potential and power of anxiety and boredom is obvious: they involve direct confrontations with our freedom and possibilities, and act as an existential catalyst for seizing hold of them more authentically. Heidegger speaks of these moods as key to unlocking the potential of an authentic life, where we own our responsibilities, choices and actions, throwing ourselves into our worlds of significance with more force, taking on our role as meaning-makers head-on. Revelatory moods allow us to view our range of possibilities and get a sense of our amazing potential as freely acting beings which create and maintain significance. But this raises an important question: how could these moods work in this way, in a time when our freedom has been dramatically *reduced*, and the social world is changing so much? Surely in this current climate, our freedom and possibilities are not what they once were. No one was freer under lockdown, no one's possibilities were increased in quarantine, and even as countries opened up again we still cannot do as much, or act as freely, as we could before. Is there room in our current time for an anxiety or boredom that is revelatory of the sheer magnitude of our freedom? Would they work in the same way, or convey the same insight?

Would a revelatory mood be revelatory of the *world* in the same way as before the pandemic, given that the social order and the significance-relations therein are changing so much? I want to suggest that, with some development, Heidegger's analysis of revelatory moods can be made to speak to the human experience of the pandemic. But first, let us briefly consider what impact non-revelatory anxiety and boredom might have had.

The more common kinds of anxiety and boredom have manifested during the pandemic in some obvious ways. Whether it is anxiety about catching the virus, whether things will ever go back to normal, economic difficulty, about adapting to the new rules, anxieties of some sort have no doubt become commonplace for many.<sup>12</sup> The same goes for boredom in quarantine or lockdown, when faced with restricted movement and a total lack of normal social life. In Heidegger's framework, these moods do not have the same existential significance or emancipatory power as their revelatory counterparts. As troubling as they can be, they still remain firmly within the everyday world of significance, situated in a context of meaning, possibilities and projects where everything makes its usual kind of sense. But this does not mean that nothing can be learned from them, or that nothing good can come of them.<sup>13</sup> People's boredom can lead them to pursue acts of self-betterment: learning, taking up hobbies, reconnecting with friends on video-conferencing apps. Anxiety, though not pleasant, can lead people to be more vigilant and take more precautions. Obviously, this does not exhaust the positive and negative aspects of anxiety and boredom, and says nothing about how they might have become interwoven in various ways during the pandemic. But it is perhaps through a shared sense of anxiety and boredom during lockdown that has led people to find new ways of enacting solidarity to try and alleviate them, such as singing with neighbours, hosting 'virtual pub quizzes' or online exercise groups. Non-re-

---

<sup>12</sup> A testament to this can be found in a cursory internet search for 'Covid anxiety', or similar. There are *numerous* articles, videos and websites dedicated to coping strategies for coronavirus anxiety. Take the UK's National Health Service one as an example. <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips/>.

<sup>13</sup> This is something Heidegger's analysis of boredom does not deal with as much as it could, since his effort is largely concentrated on the experiences involved in the first two types of boredom and how they contrast with, or can lead us to an understanding of, profound boredom.

velatory anxiety and boredom are experiences that can and have led to the emergence of different forms of solidarity, communication and connection as people adapted to the new normal of the pandemic. However, in Heidegger's framework, as much potential as these moods have, they cannot have the same level of existential power as their revelatory counterparts. Whatever their object, it cannot be our world or our existence as such because they are not sufficiently removed from significance to have an outside perspective on it – their 'object' is always something, or some things, in the world. They cannot, therefore, be revelatory in the sense Heidegger is interested in, and cannot bring the confrontation with our freedom or our being-in-the-world that occurs in revelatory anxiety and boredom.

Which brings us back to the question of how revelatory moods might function in a time where our freedom and possibilities have been reduced, and the world is changing dramatically. Do revelatory moods still make sense or work in the same way in a pandemic? The question of the world is an easier one to answer, and one that Heidegger's theorizing allows for more readily than the question of reduced freedom. Undoubtedly, the world has changed as a result of the pandemic, but how it is structured has not. The world is still structured in terms of significance, but the degree of significance attributed to certain things (and the way they relate to each other) is different now. People washed their hands and wore masks before Covid-19, so they still had significance – but the degree of significance attributed to them and the place they now have in our world has changed. Likewise with the lockdown rules of a given country and the changing degrees of significance of the things they prohibit, encourage, or regulate. Even something like going to the shop became a different experience with different kinds of significance operating on different levels, an experience now often tinged by risk and discomfort. Heidegger's account of the world as significance-structure allows for something like a pandemic to take place and the world continuing to be structured in the same way, while giving us a conceptual toolkit for examining the relations between things and the place in our lives they have, and tracking the way they change.

The question of how our change in freedom affects revelatory moods is more interesting and difficult, and can be approached by engaging with a key tension in Heidegger's thought – its connection with ethics and politics. Heidegger clearly speaks of revelatory moods as being central to unlocking our authentic potential and realising our freedom, but he always

claims that he is only being ontologically descriptive and that there is no political theory or ethical assessment going on here. But from what we have seen already, it seems clear that heading the message of a revelatory mood would benefit your life more than ignoring it - though this is still a possibility. Heidegger holds fast to the idea that he is being purely descriptive, that his project is one of 'fundamental ontology', not ethics or politics. He insists that his work "is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein, and from the aspirations of a 'philosophy of culture'" (Heidegger 1962, 211). But given the language Heidegger uses throughout his analysis of Dasein, and what he actually says in it about Dasein's being, this is surely one of the most questionable aspects of Heidegger's thought. He speaks of 'inauthentic' and 'authentic' modes of existence, characterising inauthentic existence in terms of 'fallenness', 'idle talk', 'ambiguity' and empty, un-guided 'curiosity' (Heidegger 1962, 210-225). To exist inauthentically is to unthinkingly go along with the anonymous 'they' and 'not be oneself' (Heidegger 1969, 163-169). We do not truly seize hold of our own identity and decide for ourselves who we want to be, but become immersed in the world of other people and take our identity from them: "everyone is the other, and no one is himself" (Heidegger 1962, 165). However, the possibility remains of overcoming this inauthenticity (with the aid of revelatory moods) and leading an authentic existence. Authentic existence is spoken of in terms of 'choosing and taking hold of oneself' (Heidegger 1962, 232), of arising from the "inconspicuous domination by others" (Heidegger 1962, 164), coming to terms with our own mortality, integrating it into our understanding of our existence and achieving an "authentic being-towards-death" that consists of an 'anticipatory resoluteness' in the face of it (Heidegger 1962, division 2, parts 1, 2 and 3).

Heidegger never explicitly says that one way of being is 'good' or 'bad', or 'better' or 'worse' than the other - but we need not follow him on this for his thought to be valuable for ethics or politics. How could authenticity not be better than inauthenticity? How could living without coming to terms with our mortality and identity be better than the alternative? How could responsibly seizing hold of our freedom not be a straightforwardly good thing? These questions are certainly worth pursuing in a critical development of Heidegger's work, and are indicative of some of its biggest tensions. This is what makes it such an interesting case study for thinking about the rela-



tionship between descriptive ontologies and political theorizing.<sup>14</sup> Is it really possible to conduct a purely descriptive analysis of human existence, sociality, and freedom, that has nothing to do with politics? Heidegger seems, in some sense, to think so - but it is perfectly reasonable to object to him on this point. But thankfully we can build on his work in this way, even if he did not. Any ontology which explicitly concerns itself with our social existence, our freedom and the freedom of others, has a political dimension which should be seized upon and explored. Heidegger concertedly sidesteps human politics and ethics in favour of a more abstract ontology of Dasein to prepare for the question of Being. Whether he actually managed to demonstrate that his work took place on a more fundamental and different level than these things, must be put into question. I hope to show that, at least when it comes to revelatory moods, Heidegger's work can be developed valuably on a political level, especially on the point of coming to terms with freedom. His analysis of anxiety and boredom can be used to make sense of certain experiences of the pandemic.

It would be too easy to criticise Heidegger's analysis of Dasein for being morbid, with all its focus on anxiety, fear, death (etc.) – because he always emphasizes the possibilities of authenticity and freedom that these experiences open up. The way he frames revelatory anxiety and boredom is always in terms of us realising what we can do, the massive potential we have within our worlds of meaning that we construct. One might be sceptical that such experiences take place in the same way during a lockdown - where it seems more likely that we might be bored or anxious about all we *cannot* do -and whether there would be any emancipatory potential in such experiences. But I suggest that revelatory anxiety and boredom, in Heidegger's sense, can take place in our current climate. Heidegger arguably frames revelatory anxiety and boredom more in terms of our positive freedom, what we *can* do, but surely it is possible that experiences of profound boredom and anxiety about the current global situation have occurred that have put people into contact with their *reduced freedom*. Revelatory anxiety and boredom are confrontations with our range of possibilities, which is also necessarily a confrontation

---

<sup>14</sup> And also on the relationship between his ontology and philosophical anthropology, which he also claims he is not doing. This despite the fact that the analytic of Dasein, even if it does more than this, just is an analysis of human existence.

with the limits of these possibilities. Heidegger seemed to put more emphasis on positive freedom, but to be confronted with a sphere of meaningful possibilities is to be confronted simultaneously with the limits of this sphere.<sup>15</sup> The function a revelatory anxiety or boredom could have in a pandemic, therefore, could still be to reveal the scope of our freedom, it's just that the freedom revealed in them would be dramatically reduced. But can an experience of reduced freedom contain the same emancipatory potential as an experience of our usual massive range of possibilities? In terms of its being revelatory of our role as meaning-makers, or the significance of the world, they can. This is because they still involve a temporary but complete change in the structure of our world, which gives us an outside perspective on it. If the structure of our world completely changes, we get a perspective on what it is otherwise always like, even if our sphere of possibilities is reduced. They can therefore still unlock the possibility of living authentically in the sense that Heidegger envisioned.

But perhaps there is a different dimension to the revealing of freedom present in this variety of revelatory anxiety and boredom that is not present in a pre-pandemic one. Could we not build on Heidegger and argue that there are actually two ways that our freedom can manifest itself in anxiety and boredom, and that there are slightly different existential insights that arise in them? In pre-pandemic revelatory anxiety and boredom, we get an overwhelming sense of what we can do, with our range of possibilities unfettered by lockdown. This encounter is a necessary precondition for our being able to press forward authentically into our possibilities. But in pandemic/ lockdown anxiety and boredom, we encounter our lack of freedom, our reduced range of possibilities. But the encounter with our lack of freedom is just as crucial for our being able to live authentically. This existential encounter is a necessary precondition for being able to live authentically *in spite of* our reduced freedom. It is the encounter with and realisation of our new, reduced range of free action that allows the process of working out how to live within it to begin, and how to maximise our freedom and meaning-making abilities under these conditions. It is only on the basis of this realization that any possibility of adapting to the new situation can present itself, or any new mode of

---

<sup>15</sup> This is something that he delves into when he argues in division 2 of *Being and Time* that anxiety is also the mood where our death, the limit of our existence, is disclosed.

emancipatory action could be conceived and practised in spite of our newly reduced freedom and change of situation. Non-revelatory anxiety and boredom might also lead people to engage in solidarity-forging or emancipatory practises, but Heidegger gives us a way of making sense of the idea that this type of action is only possible on the basis of a more fundamental, profound revelation of our reduced freedom, found in revelatory anxiety and boredom. We cannot be expected to live authentically within, or adapt to, our lack of freedom if we do not first encounter its range. Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and boredom locates the possibility of the disclosure of our range of possibilities in experiences of anxiety and boredom.

Another productive aspect of Heidegger's work is that it not only analyses the general, necessary structures of human existence, but gives us a way of specifying how these necessary structures generate various, contingent manifestations. Because they are a necessary precondition for realising our freedom, it is a necessary fact that people undergo experiences of revelatory moods – they are a general structure of human existence. However, this is not to say that everyone experiences the same ones, or reacts the same way to them. Some people may never experience revelatory anxiety, but might experience revelatory boredom. It is a possibility that someone experiences them and does not seize an authentic hold on their free possibilities, and continues to live an inauthentic existence. It is worth noting that experiences of revelatory anxiety and boredom in the pandemic have perhaps not all generated the same responses. Although the confrontation with freedom in anxiety and boredom has led many to engage in solidarity-forging practises and act for the health and betterment of the community – wearing masks to protect others, for instance – not everyone has responded this way. The growing anti-mask sentiment in some countries, like the USA, could be understood as a reaction to a certain anxiety or boredom, but from out of a different (perhaps inauthentic) perspective. The anti-mask rhetoric is often framed in terms of personal freedom and freedom from government interference. Perhaps there might be room for a way of making sense of this in Heideggerian terms: the anti-maskers have had the same confrontation with their lack of freedom as others, but this experience has generated a different response in them. The confrontation with their lack of freedom has led them to decry masks as oppressive, and advocate for a (perhaps anxious) scepticism about government overreach and suppression of liberties. But is it not possible that such a reaction, however misguided, could be engendered from a confrontation

with one's lack of freedom, as in the pandemic variety of revelatory anxiety and boredom?

Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and boredom gives us a way of making sense of the existential potential of profound experiences of anxiety and boredom that have no doubt characterised the Covid-19 pandemic for many. As difficult as these experiences may be, they contain the potential of a sharp encounter with our freedom because they involve an experience of a complete loss of significance of the world. Such experiences remove us from world of everyday concerns, giving us an outside perspective on it. To be raised out of our usual world of significance into a complete experience of meaninglessness confronts us with what this world is otherwise always like, and the opportunities it offers us when we are in it. In the pandemic, such experiences would arguably be quite different because our sphere of possibilities is dramatically reduced. However, it is only when we encounter our reduced range of possibilities that we can begin to live in spite of them, find ways to adapt to the new situation, and enact any kind of solidarity-forging and emancipatory practises in spite of it. Within Heidegger's theory is not just a general explanation of the function of revelatory anxiety and boredom, and a sketch of revelatory moods as a general structure of human existence, but also a way of categorising the varying responses people might have to such experience. Not all people will react to a confrontation with their lack of freedom the same way, despite undergoing similar experiences.

## REFERENCES

- Blattner W., *Translations of Heidegger's Jargon*, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/blatt-new/heid/Heidegger-jargon.html>.
- Heidegger M. (1962), *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, London, Blackwell.
- (1995), *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. by W. McNeill and N. Walker, Indiana, Indiana University Press.
- (1998), *What is Metaphysics?*, trans. by D. Farrell Krell, *Basic Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Polt R. (1999), *Heidegger: An Introduction*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Scharff R. (2019), *Heidegger Becoming Phenomenological*, New Heidegger Research Series, London, Rowman and Littlefield.
- Sheehan T. (2015), *Making Sense of Heidegger*, New Heidegger Research Series, London - New York, Rowman and Littlefield.

Slaby J. (2010), *The Other Side of Existence: Heidegger on Boredom*, Contribution to *Habitus in Habitat II – Other Sides of Cognition*, ed. by S. Flach, D. Marguiles and J. Söffner, [http://janslaby.com/downloads/slaby\\_heideggerboredom.pdf](http://janslaby.com/downloads/slaby_heideggerboredom.pdf).

*UK National Health Service's Guide for Covid-19 Anxiety*, <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips/>.

